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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: IZ KISL LE PGOV PTER

SUBJECT: MGLE01: BEHIND NASRALLAH'S MASS RALLY -- MESSAGES  
TO THE LEBANESE AND THE U.S.

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: 1.4(d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On February 23, Hizballah held a joint rally with Amal in southern Beirut in response to the bombing of the Golden Shrine in Iraq. Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech appealing for calm and asking Muslims not to reproach each other. Nasrallah instead unleashed criticism against the USG and dared the U.S. to try to disarm Hizballah. Long-time Hizballah watchers told econoff they regarded the speech as moderate and conciliatory in light of Sunni-Shia tensions in both Iraq and Lebanon. Sunni-Shia confrontations at a soccer game on February 19 underscored the need for Shia and Sunni leaders to calm down their respective communities. The Hizballah watchers said that the hidden message of the rally was in the turnout. Hizballah demonstrated that it could mobilize tens of thousands of supporters in a matter of three hours. End summary.

NASRALLAH APPEALS FOR CALM

¶2. (U) On February 23, Hizballah staged a joint rally with the Amal movement in southern Beirut to protest the bombing of the Golden Shrine in Samarra, Iraq. On February 24, econoff polled several long-time Hizballah watchers for their reaction to Nasrallah's speech. Sunni journalist Mohammad Salam, based in Sidon, said the speech was part of an effort by Sunni and Shia leaders to tamp down Sunni-Shia tensions. His sources in Dar al-Fatwa and the Higher Shia Council said that they are working on ways to reduce tensions, especially in light of Sunni-Shia violence at a soccer game on February ¶19. At a soccer match between Lebanon and Kuwait in Beirut, Sunni fans began chanting pro-Hariri slogans while Shia fans chanted pro-Nasrallah slogans. According to Salam, Shia fans, after the game, smashed windows and vandalized cars in the area, knowing that it was a mostly Sunni neighborhood. Salam commented that Nasrallah's speech was very moderate and was designed to absorb Shia anger in positive way.

¶5. (C) Shia journalist Abbas Sabbagh viewed the rally as an opportunity for Hizballah to vent anger at Secretary Rice's visit, and annoyance with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'Ja' and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. The turnout of the rally was the main message. According to Sabbagh, Hizballah wanted to show that it could mobilize a large crowd in only a few hours, with the implication that it could gather a much larger crowd if given more time. It was a demonstration of mobilization capabilities. Sabbagh noted that among the women in the audience, a higher proportion than usual were unveiled. He had expected women wearing the hijab to attend

a Hizballah rally, but the presence of so many without it suggests that Hizballah rallied secular segments of the Shia community that would not normally participate.

¶6. (C) Dr. Ahmad Moussalli, an Islamic movements expert at AUB, viewed the rally as focusing Muslim anger at the U.S. rather than between Sunni and Shia. Moussalli said that Sunni-Shia tensions have been building for some time for two reasons: Iraq and UNSCR 1559. The Sunni-Shia violence in Iraq shapes people's perceptions in Lebanon. The issues of implementation of UNSCR 1559 and removal of President Emile Lahoud are beginning to appear as Sunni on one side (March 14 Coalition) and the Shia on the other side. Moussalli noted that Hizballah was able to draw a very large crowd on only three hours notice. He saw this as a message that Hizballah is prepared to challenge UNSCR 1559 with its own demonstrations.

FELTMAN